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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 000494

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CENI SAYS ELECTIONS IMPOSSIBLE FOR 2008

REF: CONAKRY 0485

Classified By: A/DCM SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. According to the President of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI), Guinea will not be holding legislative elections this year, although he was optimistic that they would be held no later than February ¶2009. Citing a series of delays and logistical challenges, especially related to the voter registration process, Syllah said that a new elections timeline will need to be established. He was positive in his assessment of the new prime minister, but expressed concerns about the new Minister Secretary General of the Presidency as someone who may seek to block progress towards elections. END SUMMARY.

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NO ELECTIONS THIS YEAR  
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¶2. (SBU) A/DCM met with CENI president Ben Sekou Syllah on August 26 to discuss progress towards general preparations for upcoming legislative elections, which were originally due in June 2007, and eventually postponed to November/December ¶2008. In his typically straightforward manner, Syllah opened the meeting by telling A/DCM that it is impossible for Guinea to hold elections before the end of the year. In previous meetings, Syllah had been consistently optimistic that elections would move forward despite significant challenges. Syllah was still optimistic, but appeared frustrated with the practical challenges on the ground, vowing that the elections could be held by the end of February at the latest. (COMMENT. Syllah publicly announced the anticipated delay in a press conference the same day. END COMMENT).

¶3. (SBU) According to Syllah, the biggest stumbling block has been the slow start to the national voter registration program, which was finally launched last week after months of delays (reftel). He said that although the EU and the UNDP continue to maintain that registration will be completed in two to three months, the reality is that it will probably take much longer. "We're in the middle of the rainy season and Ramadan, then people are going to be planting their crops, the school year is going to start, and no one has informed the population of what the registration process is all about - they won't leave their crops to go register for something they don't understand," Ben said.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to voter registration, Syllah said that the remaining budget shortfall, logistical problems, and lack of clarity of CENI versus GoG roles in elections management continue to challenge election organizers. Syllah added that everyone is going to need to get together and agree to a new "chronogram" (elections timeline) in order to factor in the anticipated delays with the voter registration process.

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FURTHER DELAYS?

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15. (SBU) A/DCM pointed out that any delay in the scheduling of the legislative elections would likely add fuel to the fire of those advocates pushing to postpone the elections further and combine them with the local elections, which are scheduled for 2009. Syllah agreed, but said that he and others will argue to keep the legislative elections in 2008, and push to hold the local elections concurrently with the presidential elections in 2010.

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NOT 100% TRANSPARENT, BUT ACCEPTABLE ELECTIONS  
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16. (SBU) Commenting on the recent series of political appointments from the president's office, A/DCM asked Syllah about the country's prospects for transparent elections. Syllah said that there is no way they will be able to organize elections that are 100% transparent, but that "we can guarantee that the elections will be acceptable to all." He added that elections observers will be critical to transparency, estimating that more than 9000 will be needed in order to monitor all the individual voting bureaus. Syllah said that there is currently no financing for such observers.

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PM MIGHT BE HELPFUL...  
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17. (SBU) A/DCM encouraged Syllah to temporarily step away

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from his position as CENI president and speak instead as a regular citizen about his views on the current government. Syllah relaxed and said that the prime minister appears to be willing to dialogue and work with various stakeholders, although his technical capacity is not clear. According to Syllah, the cabinet is way too big. "We have new ministers who don't have offices, cars, or budgets yet - it's too much," he said.

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... BUT KEIRA MIGHT BE A PROBLEM  
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18. (C) Turning to the president's office, Syllah said that the new Minister Secretary General of the Presidency, Alpha Ibrahima Keira could pose a problem. He said that Keira does not have any legal role to play in elections organization, but that he could block the process structurally. Syllah pointed out that the president must sign a decree announcing the date for elections, but that such a decree must now go through Keira. "If he wants to slow things down, he's in the right position to do so," Syllah said.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) There has been increasing doubt among the international community and domestic participants alike about the likelihood of elections being held before the end of the year, although Syllah has always maintained that it could be done. His recent change of heart indicates that the USG will probably need to consider what it can do to maintain pressure so that elections move forward in early 2009. Continued elections difficulties bolster efforts by certain stakeholders to further delay the process, the lack of which completely undermines democratic progress. Meanwhile, the president's ruling Party for Unity and Progress is slowly but steadily making its way back into key government positions, which is making citizens nervous about the prospects for government neutrality and overall transparency. END COMMENT.

